Watch Your Pronouns

JOHN I. HARTLEY

Any grammar book will tell you that words such as *I, me, my,* and *mine* are *singular* pronouns, and that is usually true. Sometimes, though, especially in military situations, such pronouns can take on a decidedly *plural* meaning, and then there is a danger that a listener will misinterpret them.

Suppose the person using I-me-my-mine is also the leader of a squad or a platoon or a company. When he says "I am at the OP," do we think of just one person? Not at all. We think of his squad or platoon or company. One of the best known lines involving a pronoun is General Douglas MacArthur's "I shall return," but nobody who heard that ever assumed that he was returning to the Philippines alone. And he most certainly did not.

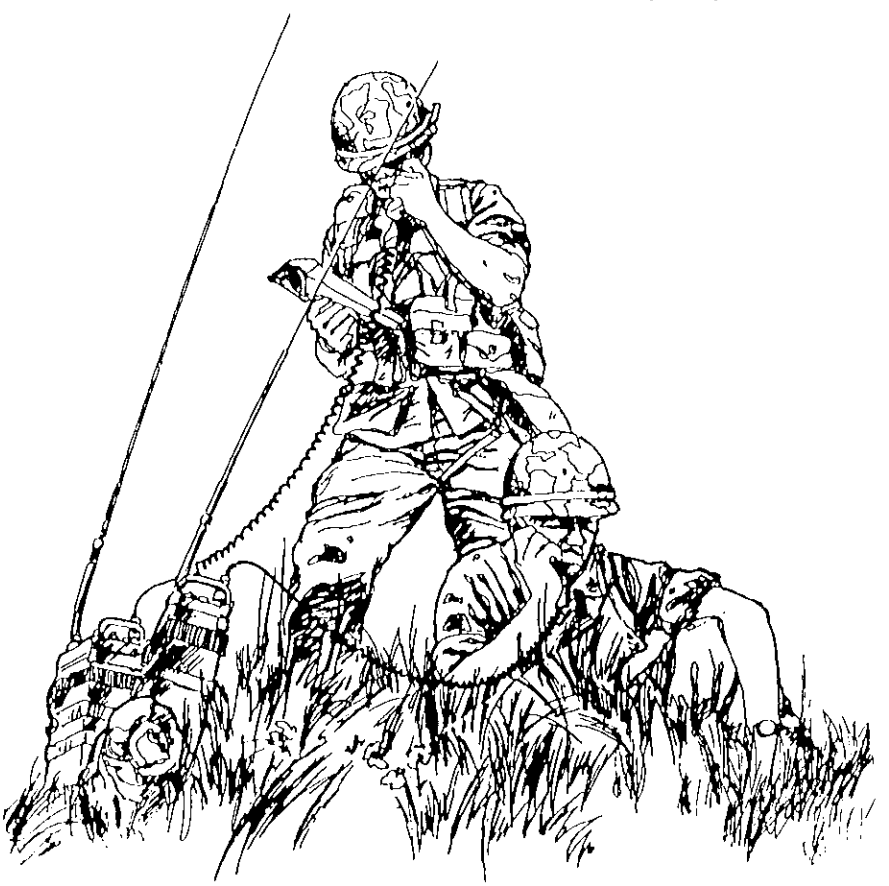
So what? What do pronouns have to do with infantry combat? Sometimes they can have a great deal to do with it, because accurate communication is crucial to the success of any mission.

I was part of a World War II operation in which the misunderstanding of a pronoun caused considerable confusion and probably some avoidable casualties as well. Our battalion had attacked over the flat open country west of the Roer River, aiming toward a village opposite the larger town of Julich. About dusk we received word at battalion headquarters that Captain —— of Company G was in the village. Through the squawking static we heard him say, "I am in the town." At that, the battalion commander gave word to displace the headquarters and bring up Company E, which had been in reserve. Very soon, though, we became aware that there were more Germans in the town and at its approaches than there were members of Company G.

As we withdrew, bloody nosed, we learned quite belatedly that Captain —— was in the village all right—with six men! The rest of his company had been pretty well shot up and disorganized, but Captain ——, more of a first-scout hero type than a company commander, had managed with a small group to get into the town under cover of darkness—and then had found himself and his group surrounded by very healthy Germans. Luckily for them, they were able to remain safely hidden until we renewed our attack and took the town.

Several things were wrong here—bad communications discipline, a too hasty interpretation of the message received, and certainly a dereliction of command duty on the part of Captain ——.

Communication depends on equipment as well as people, and the radios we had at that time were relatively primitive. Still, despite the static and the fadeouts, there should have been some way for Captain —— to indicate more clearly in his first response to the battalion's inquiry just what his situation was. Ideally, any unit should



have some established way, in a code not quickly recognized by the enemy, of giving its strength, location, and situation. But the ideal seldom prevails in combat, and Captain ----'s first-person message was probably delivered with Germans almost literally breathing down his neck.

And how about the receivers of his message? Those of us with the battalion commander were so elated when the captain said "I am in the town" that we didn't do what a combat staff must do—which is to be skeptical. We were too quick to assume that he was there with his whole company. We all happily agreed with the battalion commander's decision to move our ragtag headquarters unit forward and to get Company E in there to support Captain ---- and his "company."

And what about Captain ----'s action in moving into the village with only six men? No doubt it was a brave, bold action, worthy of recognition for an individual soldier. But he was not an individual soldier; he was a company commander. Once he detached himself with those six men, he could no longer do his proper job. Lacking a command focus, the company, already mauled, disintegrated into squad and platoon fragments, unable to maintain anything close to company effectiveness.

There is a long-winded old saying concerning a battle that was lost "for want of a nail," because the horse that was also lost was carrying the commander whose presence could have made the difference between victory and defeat. In this small action on the Roer River, it was not a nail that was lost but a pronoun—or rather the *meaning* of a pronoun, which had been mistakenly used and wrongly interpreted.

Moral: If you command anything more than yourself, be very careful when you say "I."

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Bridging Differences

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Training to fight in combined operations alongside our allies and friends is a necessity in almost every theater of operation and throughout the spectrum of conflict, from low intensity to high.* There are naturally some challenges associated with this coalition.

General Dwight Eisenhower, for example, had the monumental task of pulling together the Western Allies during World War II. Fortunately, in the desperate situation in which they found themselves, all the participants realized that without their mutual cooperation, the war would be lost.

By contrast, today's world often lacks a clearly definable threat that would compel friendly nations to work together. (The NATO alliance and our commitment in Korea may be the exceptions.) In particular, the developing countries are being threatened by conflicting internal interests as well as being wooed by various external factions in a highly unstable political atmosphere.

Because of its global economic and political interests, and its stature as a key defender of freedom, the United States is frequently involved in worldwide challenges. Additionally, the U.S. cannot refuse to respond to those who would strike at its vital interests, and when it does respond, the armed forces are often the principal actors.

The commitments U.S. armed forces must fulfill in NATO, Korea, and elsewhere require them to work, train, and if necessary fight alongside forces from widely diverse nations and cultures. There are specific challenges involved in these commitments, challenges that all leaders, down to the lowest levels, at least need to be aware of. First, however, some general observations should be noted regarding existing agreements and the overall mindset governing the United States' participation in coalition arrangements.

For one thing, there may already be certain treaties, status-of-forces agree-

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